PAUL BUNYAN DRIVE (TH 197) RECONSTRUCTION

City of Bemidji, Minnesota

City of Bemidji
Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT)
1997- 2003

Project Type: Urban Arterial, 4-lane (one-way pairs), Reconstruction

PURPOSE

To reconfigure and reconstruct TH197 at the south entrance into Bemidji, Minnesota, consolidating driveway access, stabilizing the shoreline of Lake Bemidji, creating storm water ponds to enhance water quality, creating new traffic and pedestrian bridges over the Mississippi River, constructing new bicycle, pedestrian, and snowmobile trails, including a pedestrian promenade along Lake Bemidji as part of forming a "gateway" experience..

DESCRIPTION

For fifteen years the City of Bemidji, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, regulatory agencies, and tribal leaders had explored ways to improve the transportation function, reduce the adverse environmental impacts, ensure the preservation of cultural resources, stimulate economic growth, and enhance the aesthetics of the corridor. No solution was agreeable to all parties and three failed studies had left the community and sponsoring agencies bitter and cynical.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In 1997, a consulting engineering firm, Short Elliott Hendrickson, was hired by the City of Bemidji in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to facilitate a process to resolve the competing transportation, environmental, social, economic, and aesthetic issues that had divided the community. Using innovative public involvement techniques, a two person team composed of a landscape architect and a preliminary design highway engineer led a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) in defining the issues, establishing project goals, generating and evaluating alternatives solutions, and in selecting a preferred alternative. At each step, the consent of every member of the PAC was requested to accept the findings of the committee before moving on to the next phase. The process would not move forward until all members of the PAC, representing the diverse interests of the community, publicly consented to the committee's findings. The two-person team conducted meetings with concerned property owners, individual meetings with regulatory agencies, and separate

meetings with tribal authorities to reach consent prior to the PAC meetings. These meetings would be augmented by other professionals from Mn/DOT and the consulting firm as appropriate. The preferred alternative was proposed jointly by the City of Bemidji and Mn/DOT and approved by the community in less than six months.

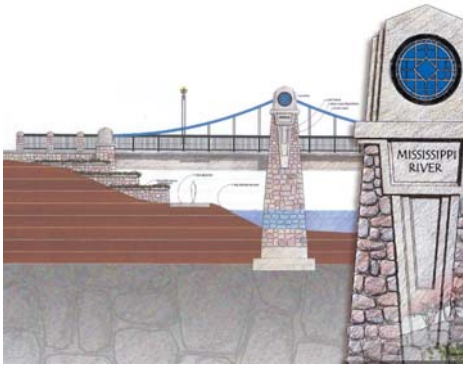
In addition to the public engagement process, the consulting team facilitated monthly meetings between the City and Mn/DOT. These meetings allowed the two project sponsors to coordinate their interests and orchestrate the public engagement process.

CONTEXT SENSITIVE SOLUTIONS APPROACH

Critical to the CSS approach was the engagement of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). By understanding that water quality and trail improvements were primary issues for the DNR, the consultants were able to "trade" a significant improvement in water quality for a minor amount of fill being placed in a lake adjacent to the corridor to provide space for the highway and an improved pedestrian trail. The initial stance of the DNR not to allow any fill into Lake Bemidji, softened when it became clear that the City and Mn/DOT were trying also to enhance the environment and improve recreational facilities.

Similarly, businesses in the corridor were contacted individually and each of their needs and aspirations was included to the extent that they matched or did not interfere with the goals established by the PAC. Particular attention was paid to the two railroads that had significant right-of-way parallel to the highway—land that could be used for the highway, trails, or retention ponds. By engaging the railroads early and understanding their particular requirements, the project was able to improve the railroad alignment and purchase excess railroad right-of-way for highway uses.

OUTCOME



The preferred alternative turned the existing four-lane route and a nearly abandoned back street into a one-way pair. The westbound segment, moving toward downtown, replaced the existing four-lane facility, providing space for extensive landscaping and pedestrian amenities adjacent to the lakefront that paralleled the highway. The eastbound segment was placed on a derelict backstreet, one block south of the existing highway. This unusual set of one-way routes has created a surge in economic activity and the construction of several new businesses, including an upscale beachfront hotel.

The final design created a gateway into the City of Bemidji with a signature bridge inspired by earlier WPA projects. The new bridge established the Mississippi River as a community icon. The project enhanced water quality, reduced lakeshore erosion, added corridor landscaping, constructed a set of recreational trails, and improved recreational access to the river and lakes.

The public has overwhelmingly supported the improvements including new roadway improvements, gateway bridges, trails, and aesthetic improvements. The project has fostered greater respect for Mn/DOT and has given the department the credibility to tackle other complicated and controversial improvements in Bemidji.

In 2001, the project received an award for Environmental Excellence—Excellence in Livable Communities—from the FHWA.

The construction highway was completed in the summer of 2003.

CHALLENGES

The primary design challenge was to transform a visually unattractive entrance into Bemidji into a stunning gateway drive where space was limited. The one-way pairs achieved this goal.

The primary public relations challenge was to engage a public who had previously resisted this construction project. By using the principles of CSS, the project sponsors not only received consent but they got an enthusiastic public support from all stakeholders.

The primary scoping challenge was to be selective about aesthetic improvements to create the highest impact possible with new improvements. Since the City of Bemidji was unable to commit dollars to this project, standard transporation improvements such as bridges, lighting, trails, and landscaping had to perform well.

The primary political challenge was to identify the appropriate person or persons to represent tribal interests in determining the presence or absence of Indian burial sites or historic locations of spirit houses was not initially clear. There was much institutional misinformation within Mn/DOT about how to approach tribes with this issue. The "official" State of Minnesota defined channels were found to be inappropriate. Important decisions, such as the potential disturbance of buried bodies, were only to be made by Tribal Elders. Engaging Tribal Elders was crucial to the success of the project. The final location of the bridge was based on their concerns.

FUNDING

This project has been successfully reconstructed using federal and state transportation funds, including transportation enhancement dollars. The project was completed in 2003. The City of Bemidji continues to add public art and landscaping to the corridor.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Deciding who leads the project is critical. In some cases, cities may provide more credible leadership in the eyes of stakeholders than the state departments of transportation.
- It is essential to get the right stakeholders to the table to guide the project.
- Be flexible in engaging stakeholders. In particular, use one-on-one meetings to establish a dialogue and trust.
- A team consisting of a civil engineer and a landscape architect is very effective for extracting and understanding issues, facilitating the development of project goals and objectives, defining and evaluating alternatives. (It is also important that both the civil engineer and landscape architect enjoy working together and share a commitment to CSS principles, methods, and outcomes.)

- Reaching consent from all stakeholders before moving to the next phase of the design process accelerates the process.
- Listening to stakeholders and designing solutions that respond to their concerns is essential for achieving consent and success.
- Aesthetic solutions should draw from contextual cues.

KEY WORDS

Applicable Project Delivery Stages: Planning, Scoping, Design

Applicable Transportation Professionals: Highway Engineers, Structural Engineers, Urban Designers, Landscape Architects, Architects, Geotechnical Engineers, Hydrological Engineers, Archeologists, Wetland Biologists, Cultural Resource Specialist

Applicable Transportation Modes: Vehicular, Bicycle, Pedestrian, Boating

Transportation Topics: Visual Quality, Safety, Geometrics, Design Speed, Contextual Character, Cultural Resource Preservation, Design Palette, Sustainable Materials, Shoreline Stabilization, Informed Consent, Environmental Impact Study

WEB LINKS

2001 FHWA Environmental Excellence Award—Excellence in Livable Communities
http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/eea2001/eea01_11.htm

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